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AUTHOR Caffarella, Rosemary S.
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ABSTRACT

Only eight recent studies clearly fit the parameters of qualitative research on self-directed learning. Four of the studies appear to fit the more traditional notion of what the qualitative paradigm is all about, in that they are exploratory in nature. The remaining four studies focus more on the expansion of earlier ideas that had been generated by previous research on self-directed learning. The number of subjects for all but one study can be characterized as "normal" for studies that are qualitative in nature (sizes ranged from 10 to 33). What is interesting is that in general they appear more broadly based in terms of the educational and socieconomic background of the subjects than the quantitative studies. The data collection technique used most often was the unstructured or semistructured interview. An examination of these studies as a group indicates that the key contribution the authors have provided to the knowledge on self-directed learning is a more in-depth picture of how individual learners go about organizing, doing, and evaluating their own learning. These findings provide a fruitful direction for future research on self-directed learning. (YLB)

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Rosemary Caffarella
Box 2020
Virginia Commonwealth U.
Richmond, Va 23284-2020

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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Rosemary S. Caffarella, Virginia Commonwealth University

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The study of self-directed learning has become a major category of research efforts within the field of adult education. The notion of expanding the methodologies for study has been echoed frequently by a number of authors in the field (Long and Associates, 1988; Caffarella and O'Donnell, 1987). Building on Brockett's (1985) observations, the majority of research that has been completed in this area has been descriptive in nature, and grounded in the seminal work of Tough (1971). What is seen less often are studies framed from the quantitative paradigm, with even fewer carried out within the framework of qualitative research. The purpose of this presentation is to provide a summary of the recent studies on self-directed learning which have been framed in this latter paradigm. As this presenter could only locate eight studies which clearly fit the parameters of qualitative research, she chose to include them all in her observations on this strand of research.

In analyzing the material from a methodological framework, four different aspects are reviewed: the basic "thrust" of the research; the subjects; the data collection techniques or sources; and how these studies have added to our knowledge base on self-directed learning. Four of the studies (Houle, 1961; Gibbons, Bailey, Comeau, Schmuck, Seymour, & Wallace 1980, Danis & Tremblay, 1988; Caffarella & O'Donnell,1988) appear to fit the more traditional notion of what the qualitative paradigm is all about, in that they are exploratory in

nature. For example, Gibbons, et al. (1980) by analyzing biographies of experts in their fields, sought to discover "commonalities that suggest ways people become effectively self-directed in their learning and their accomplishments" (p.41), while Caffarella and O'Donnell (1988) explored the quality issue as related to work-place self-directed learning. The remaining four studies (Brookfield, 1981; Leean & Sisco, 1981; Spear & Mocker,1984; and Spear, 1988) focus more on the expansion of earlier ideas that had be generated by previous research on self-directed learning. Spear and Mocker (1984), for example, examined more closely the process people used in planning their self-directed learning activities, while Spear (1988) conducted a pilot study to test the empirical value of social learning theory as a means for studying both processes and forces in self-directed learning.

The number of subjects for each study, except for the Spear & Mocker (1984) study (n=78) can be characterized as "normal" for studies that are qualitative in nature (n sizes ranged from 10 to 33). What is interesting is that in general they appear more broadly based in terms of the educational and socio-economic background of the subjects than the quantitative studies. For example, in only two of the eight studies (Caffarella & O'Donnell,1988 and Spear, 1988) are the subjects primarily Caucasian, middle class and well-educated persons, while three of the researchers (Gibbons,et al., 1980; Leean & Sisco,1981; Spear & Mocker, 1984) purposely chose subjects with high school diploma levels or less. Again, as with the studies in general on self-directed learning, the descriptions of the subjects tend to be incomplete with the noted exception to this being Houle's (1961) work. One possible subject bias of

these studies relates to the nature of the learner. Half of authors (Houle, 1961; Gibbons et al., 1981; Brookfield, 1981; and Danis and Tremblay, 1988) consciously choose subjects who were either experts in their respective areas of study and/or adults who were engaged to an outstanding degree in educational activities.

The data collection technique used most often in these studies was the unstructured or semi-structured interview. One team of researchers (Leean & Sisco, 1981) also used standardized tests and observations along with the interview format. The two remaining studies used biographies of experts in their fields (Gibbons et al., 1980) and focus groups (Caffarella & O'Donnell, 1988).

The study that has had the most impact on our knowledge base in self-directed learning is Houle's, The Inquiring Mind (1961). One of the reasons this author believes the impact of this study has been so great is the dual properties of simplicity and elegance that this study embodies, both in terms of the stated purpose and methodology used. This study served as the cornerstone for the semimel work of Tough (1971) which has been the model for the majority of the descriptive research on self-directed learning.

The remaining seven studies, all published after 1980, have also raised some interesting hypotheses, observations and questions as noted below.

. Formulation of fourteen tentative principles of self-education (Gibbons, et al., 1980)

. Confirmed the substantial amount of independent learning by "experts" without accreditation from or recognitions by professional adult educators and the importance of peer learners (fellow enthusiasts) (Brookfield, 1981)

. Self-directed learning was found to be guided by a natural, rational problem solving mode, and yet recognition that a problem was answered came more through non-rational or altered states of consciousness (Leean & Sisco, 1981)

.Proposed and demonstrated that self-directed learners do not plan their learning process in a linear fashion, but rather this process of learning is more effected by the circumstances in which these learners find themselves (coined the organizing circumstance) (Spear and Mocker, 1984).

. Questioned the premise that self-taught learners use a linear process in planning and carrying out their learning efforts. Rather, learners seem to go about their projects using multiple approaches (Danis and Tremblay, 1988)

. Expanded the notion of the organizing circumstance to include the idea that each self-directed learning project consists of clusters or units of resources and materials, with each cluster having their own determinant and initially being independent of one another. Proposes a cluster/element analysis for more in-depth study of the process of self-directed learning (Spear, 1988)

. Suggested that key indicators of quality self-directed work-related learning activities are related to the perceived control learners have of that learning process, the ease of locating useful resources, the

effect that their learning had on "the customers" of their services, and how satisfied they are with their learning efforts (Caffarella and O'Donnell, 1988).

In examining these studies as a group, the key contribution these authors have provided to the knowledge base on self-directed learning is a more in-depth picture of how individual learners go about organizing, doing and evaluating their own learning. In general, these learners do not plan their learning activities in a highly systematic fashion, progressing from learning goals and objectives to action and evaluation. Rather, this process appears to be a mosaic of individual styles of learning which are imbedded in everyday circumstances of life, with the resulting learning process being an interaction between those two forces.

It is suggested that further research into how learners organize, do and judge their self-directed learning activities, based on the findings of these qualitative studies provides a fruitful direction for future research on self-directed learning.

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